

# A Guide to Writing Academic Essays in Religious Studies

Scott G. Brown



## Note to the Reader

This guide follows British conventions of spelling and punctuation, but switches to American punctuation when illustrating the conventions of documentation prescribed in *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Since students in most Commonwealth countries are encouraged to use 'British' punctuation in their essays (including the documentation), and North American students are encouraged to use 'American' punctuation, I recommend that students who are unsure of the differences between American and British punctuation start with the explanations provided in the sections on documentation and style.

## 1 The Essentials of Essay Writing, for Students New to Religious Studies

### What Is an Academic Essay?

In order to write a good essay it is customary to develop a thesis, which is a particular proposition to be argued. Essays are not general discussions of a topic, like those found in a textbook. Ideally, they are arguments of a particular point that you consider to be correct and worth making. To begin an essay you should do extensive reading on a specific, as yet unresolved (or too facetiously resolved) topic, critically assess the positions of the authors you consult, and then integrate their findings and your own insights into a paper that presents your considered opinion on the matter. The first paragraph (or so) briefly outlines the issue your paper addresses then presents a clearly formulated thesis statement describing your position. The body of the essay attempts to demonstrate the validity of your thesis through a logical progression of arguments. The final paragraphs sum up what you have demonstrated and comment on its relevance.

Essays, then, do not just summarize handbook discussions of a topic, nor do they just repeat the standard arguments for an established position. They are attempts to convince others that your way of conceptualizing a matter is correct. The mode of presentation for an essay is therefore analytical: by examining the relevant evidence, you show that your thesis better accounts for the facts than do the competing theses. Alternatively, you may endeavour to prove only that one particular thesis or theory is false. The thesis of your paper need not be original. It may be a position that you encountered in your research, or an adaptation of a position.

That is, you might be taking sides in a debate, arguing that a thesis or theory offered by one scholar or group of scholars best explains the data.

This argumentative approach is the standard format for a research paper. It is the format one comes across most often in articles published in academic journals. The argumentative essay is the best format to showcase your ability to think critically and independently. It is not, however, the only way to write an essay. A variation on this format is what might be called the exploratory essay, which starts with a problem, intensively analyses the evidence, then reaches a conclusion (i.e. what otherwise would be the thesis) at the end. Some people prefer to write a paper this way because it allows them to review all the evidence systematically, thereby conveying to their readers that their own assessment is not controlling and biasing their analysis, leading them to conceal evidence they cannot explain. While the motive is commendable, this procedure can sometimes make your paper harder to understand, for it involves a lengthier presentation of the evidence and may leave your reader wondering what all this analysis is leading up to. Having a thesis statement may engender better organization and clearer communication of your thoughts, for the structure of the paper will be determined by whatever would be the most logical progression of the arguments and discussions that substantiate your case.

Another sort of essay discusses the origin and development of some aspect of a religion, for instance the evolution of the Hindu god Shiva, or of the practice of sati, or of the Jewish and Christian conceptions of Satan. Such issues usually do not lend themselves to the formulation of a single thesis statement because many disparate factors may contribute to a sequence of historical changes, and each must be analysed individually. Because the scope of these essays is broad and the subjects of analysis are not always controversial, essays like these do not always provide as good a forum for demonstrating your ability to think for yourself. It might be

better to discuss only one stage in the development of some feature of a religion, particularly a stage about which there is some dispute.

One type of essay deserves mention as an example of what you should not produce: a descriptive essay offering standard information about a religion. Do you remember when you were in junior high school and your teacher told you to write a report on some topic, whereupon you went to the library, opened up the encyclopedia, and tried to put the information into your own words? Your intellect has by now surpassed that challenge. A university research essay is not just newly repackaged information. An essay that offers a mere description of 'The Shinto Religion' or 'The Five Ks of Sikhism' or 'The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism' might not receive a passing grade.

In addition to these general kinds of essays, there are special types of essays that rely on the standard argumentative approach. One might choose to do a comparative essay, that is, an essay that compares two religious traditions with respect to a particular subject. One might compare Buddhist and Hindu understandings of rebirth, Buddhist and Christian understandings of the essence of a human, or Israel and Pakistan as two religious states. Essays of this sort still require a thesis or at least a 'point' to be made. Noting similarities and differences between two religions is a useless endeavour unless something meriting argument can be demonstrated through this comparison. Thus the comparison must have a definite focus, and the analysis of similarities and differences should substantiate some larger insight, which would be the thesis of the paper.

Another specific type of essay is the exegetical essay. The word *exegesis* derives from a Greek word meaning 'to lead out'. The term refers to established methods of interpretation designed to draw the author's meaning out of a text. The systematic approaches of exegesis are a means of countering the natural tendency to read one's own presuppositions into religious texts (which is called eisegesis). An exegetical paper

explains the meaning of a particular passage of scripture, or of a group of related passages. Such essays are arguments about what the writer of the passage meant these words to convey. An exegetical essay might, for example, explain a perplexing passage, such as the comment in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus taught the crowds in parables so that they would not understand him (4:10–12); or it might explain what a particular author meant by a particular phrase or concept through an analysis of all the passages in which that phrase or concept occurs. Again, these essays should have a thesis. Unlike commentaries on scripture, exegetical papers do not go sentence by sentence through the passage explaining every thought in order. The structure of an exegetical essay should correspond to the most logical and compelling presentation of evidence and arguments that support a particular interpretation. It is essential to engage other scholars' interpretations of the passage and to show that they are less adequate interpretations by pointing out features of the passage that they cannot explain.

### **The Methodological and Theoretical Presuppositions of Religious Studies**

In public universities, the study of religion is an academic rather than a religious exercise. We are not out to defend or refute the spiritual values and beliefs of the religions we investigate, for such things are not usually open to scientific inquiry. Instead, we set metaphysical and supernatural matters aside and concentrate on what can be learned about religious phenomena through the 'secular' avenues of investigation used in the humanities. This is not to suggest that academic scholarship seeks to 'explain away' religious realities or to reduce them entirely to factors that are not religious. Rather, it is to affirm that *all* aspects of human behaviour and experience are influenced by forces that are open to scientific investigation (e.g. social, psychological, economic, cultural, and political forces) – regardless of

whether other scientifically inscrutable factors are involved. Thus, scholars investigate the religious dimension of human behaviour using the very same methods, theories, and assumptions that academics use to study human nature in the humanities and social sciences. The tools of historiography, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, and so forth may not tell us everything we want to know about religion. Indeed, a strictly academic approach is not apt to shed light upon the ultimate questions of human existence. But for pragmatic reasons, metaphysical investigations of religious truths are best conducted in places where all persons involved already agree upon a set of theological presuppositions, and that kind of consensus rarely occurs outside of academic communities that are based on religious affiliation, such as seminaries, Bible colleges, university theology departments, Jewish yeshivot (rabbinic academies), Hindu theological colleges, and meditation groups. In a context that is as religiously pluralistic as a public university, researchers cannot derive axioms from their faith, support their claims through appeal to revelation or dogma, or cite scripture as an authority that is above question. Rather, they are obliged to limit themselves to theoretical assumptions, methods, forms of argument, and kinds of evidence that are open to scrutiny and challenge by anyone. Thus scholars make an effort to step outside of their own religious presuppositions and allow reason and logic to function as generally accepted standards for truth. The institutional endeavour to develop and refine a common, empirically based set of presuppositions is what permits researchers of differing faiths to communicate meaningfully and reach the kind of consensus that furthers the academic enterprise.

It follows that scholars who work in public universities are not trying to comprehend religions in the ways that religions tend to comprehend themselves, in terms of encounters between the supernatural and the human. Rather than considering intangible forces such as enlightenment, divine inspiration, revelation, and divine intervention, scholars

focus on tangible factors discernible within the larger social-historical context. At first blush, this restriction of the academic study of religion to what is tangible and measurable might seem to misconstrue the essence of religion. But whatever that essence might be (the question is endlessly debated), religion involves more than spirituality and cannot be fully comprehended without reference to those other, more down-to-earth qualities. When you examine religious ideas and practices within their historical contexts, they become less mystifying, more intelligible. Metaphysical systems lose some of the ethereal quality of disembodied thoughts. And the proponents of these systems cease to appear simply as hallowed beings who had a special revelation of the truth and the moral fortitude to proclaim it. The academic approach enables us to appreciate the ways in which the founders of religious movements were culturally conditioned individuals who, like ourselves, accepted most of the prevailing assumptions of their societies. And it enables us to appreciate how the new and influential aspects of their teachings had social and political relevance to that time and place.

Traditional accounts of the origins of religious customs and beliefs usually envision godly teachers who either brought eternal truth down from heaven (e.g. Krishna, Jesus, Sun Myung Moon), received it as a revelation from above (Moses, Zoroaster, the Jewish prophets, Muhammad, Nanak, Baha'u'llah, Joseph Smith), acquired access to it through some rite or procedure (shamans, magicians), or managed through discipline to transcend their own culture and humanity to a point where they could see ultimate reality as it truly is (the Buddha, Mahavira). Whatever truth there is to these conceptions, we should not let them preclude historical analysis of the formative thinkers and texts, and obscure the relationship between religious truth and the shape of society. This relationship is obscured not only by explanations of religion that appeal to revelation and enlightenment, but also by explanations that attribute religious customs and ideals to

a religious leader's personal dispositions and beliefs. Explaining that a particular leader ordained something because he or she believed something is a circular explanation unless that belief is itself accounted for as a reasonable response to particular circumstances. Saying, for instance, that the Buddha had no regard for the caste system because he *believed* that anyone can attain enlightenment is an empty, circular explanation. For it does not explain why, as a person living in a particular set of circumstances in a particular time and place, he might have been disposed to see the matter that way. Noting that his disregard for caste was part of a wider rejection of aspects of Brahmanism (e.g. the authority of the Vedas, expensive animal sacrifices) that undergirded an inequitable social structure in artificial dependency upon the priestly class – *that is an historical explanation (whether or not it is the best one).*

It is useful to consider how religious ideas can do things. Whereas entrenched religious ideals tend to preserve the status quo, new or revived ideals often empower social change. When religious thinkers reject the metaphysical basis of one system of thought in favour of another, they are often producing a new world-view or system of meaning that entails a revised social order. The introduction of a new cosmology (i.e. a new view of the 'shape' of the universe and of our places within it) through the promotion of a new doctrine can result in tangible benefits to the adherents, which in turn help explain the popularity of a tradition. For example, being a Buddhist in the fifth century BCE could raise the social status of a person from a lower *varna* (class) and make possible the pursuit of social and religious goals that were being curtailed by Brahmanism. Students studying the origins of theistic religions (e.g. the teachings of Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, or the Sikh gurus) are especially likely to overlook the social, political, and economic factors that made these new messages attractive. The 'pipeline' model of revelation is so deeply entrenched in these traditions (and much of the scholarship on them) that

X people seldom think to ask *why* these founders might themselves have embraced the messages they proclaimed, and why so many people responded to them.

It is important to be very clear about the proper methods and subject matter of academic investigation in a public university because the writing of *religious* or *theological* essays is a common and costly mistake. Each year teachers and graders in introductory religion courses receive essays exploring questions such as: What is the truest form of Sikhism? Is Jesus the Son of God? Should Muslim women wear the veil? And so on. These may all be stimulating questions, and the essays produced may be judged to be very good *in a religious or theological context*; but they frequently result in a failing grade because they do not offer the marker a chance to evaluate the breadth of the student's research into the academic literature and ability to analyse an issue according to the methods of that scholarship. It is possible to study the ideas of theologians and other religious thinkers without *doing* theology yourself, provided you take a disinterested, third-person perspective and consider these ideas as social phenomena, intelligible within that particular time and place. *But if you have difficulty viewing your own religion the way that scholars investigate 'other people's' beliefs, then write your essay on another religion* (if that is an option). Researching a religion of which you are not a participant is the safest option, particularly considering that students new to university Religious Studies find it very difficult to recognize when they are assuming things that scholars would not accept. What scholars have concluded about a matter and what people are taught about that matter through their religious education are often very different things.

### What You Can Assume about Your Grader's Background Knowledge

Students are often unsure about what information or assumptions they can take for granted in their essay and what

they need to define, explain, or argue. For survey courses on the world's religions, it is generally best to presume only that your grader knows and accepts the information and hypotheses about a particular religion that are offered in the course readings and lectures. That means that if you select a topic not covered in the course itself, you will need to do more explaining than usual. In North America, the graders in World Religions courses are often graduate students who specialize in one particular period of one religion. The professors in these survey courses usually have more general knowledge about religions, but are also not experts in all religions. You can get some sense of how much your grader knows about your topic by discussing your paper with him or her while you are still researching it. If you know that you will be evaluated by someone who has studied your topic (as is more typically the case in higher-level courses), you can explain less. Bear in mind that it must be evident that *you* know the meanings, relevant dates, and so forth of the terms you are using. If that is not apparent to your grader through the cogency of your discussion, he or she will likely write comments such as 'define' or 'explain' (the same applies for tests).

### How Is an Essay Evaluated?

Your grader will attempt to assess the extent of your research and learning on the topic; the amount of independent, critical reflection that preceded your solution; and the reasonableness and intellectual integrity of your arguments. Your ability to express your thoughts clearly and effectively in an organized and compelling manner will also be assessed, as will the completeness and correctness of the paper's documentation. The grading covers both form and content.